

3PointTurn – Episode 11: Defensive Driving

FLHSMV:

You're listening to 3PointTurn, a driver safety podcast presented by the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. In promotion of a safer Florida, FLHSMV offers this educational series as a supplemental resource to the Florida Driver License Handbook. For more information on the topics presented in this podcast, please visit FLHSMV.gov.

On this episode, the FLHSMV team talks about defensive driving and provides tips on how to avoid a crash involving your vehicle.

Derek Perez:

Welcome to 3PointTurn. I'm your host Derek Perez. I'm joined for the third time by Major Chris Blackmon, a 30-year veteran of the Florida Highway Patrol and FHP's Troop H commander. Welcome back, sir.

Major Blackmon:

Thank you. We have another important topic to discuss in this episode.

Derek Perez:

I find them all very meaningful, but anytime we can talk about preventing a crash, it really gets to the core of what FLHSMV tries to promote so often, which is making a safer Florida.

Major Blackmon:

Absolutely. I completely agree with you and I've seen thousands and thousands of crashes in my career, and honestly, I wish I could tell you it was zero.

Derek Perez:

I can't imagine some of the things you must have seen. That's why I hope our listeners are learning from the material that we've been highlighting throughout this podcast. And for this episode, we're going to talk about defensive driving. Can you explain what that is?

Major Blackmon:

Absolutely. Defensive driving is a process of using driving strategy to minimize risk and avoid crashes by predicting hazards on the road. And also defensive driving, I believe, is to do away with distracted driving within the own cabin of your vehicle. Again, we've talked about in other episodes, which would be texting, using your cell phone, any other thing we could do in the car, shaving, eating, reading newspapers, I've seen all of it. Things like that need to be eliminated to make you a better driver.

Derek Perez:

So defensive driving isn't purely defensive. It's more like the sports phrase, the best defense is a good offense.

Major Blackmon:

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That's exactly right. You know a quality football team doesn't just have a good offense or a good defense. They have both, and they help each other. Basically it's being well rounded and you can do that as a driver as well.

Derek Perez:

If your driving is purely reactionary, you're going to be a timid and scared behind the wheel, which can be just as dangerous as being overly aggressive. Impatience and speed and fearlessness can be your weakness if you're overly aggressive.

You want to balance the overt caution with bold strategy. Now to carry this football analogy further, you should evaluate your weaknesses and find ways to improve. Poor quarterback play? Draft a quarterback and surround surrounded with weapons. Struggling with merging into traffic? Maybe there's a way to improve that facet of your driving, with practice and confidence.

Major Blackmon:

Merging is a good example. If you just put on your blinker and wait for others to let you into the lane, most likely you're going to slow down traffic behind you, and there's no guarantee you'll get into the next lane. You also can't just merge into traffic with no warning at all, because that causes others to slam on their brakes. The best strategy, I would say would be to turn on your blinker, gauge your space from the mirrors and then assertively yet cautiously emerge into the other way.

Derek Perez:

All right, with that, I'm going to break down our first point on the topic of defensive driving. Safety first, within that here's some ways to be safety minded when you leave your driveway. Major Blackmon, please start us off.

Major Blackmon:

The keys are you need to have a plan. Before you start your car, where you going? Do you have a route? I think the best thing is, if your phone syncs to your car, sync it in. Pre-program the destination you're going to, and let your Waze or Google maps or Apple maps direct you, how to get there. It makes it easier, because also if you have a detour off the route, it's going to reroute your travel and get you there safely.

Stay focused while you're driving. Again, I've said it before, but it's the distracted driving with the cell phones. Put them down, safely get to where you're going. Additionally, avoid any distractions at all, stay alert and watch out for the others. Pay attention to your surroundings, as I've said in the other episodes.

Derek Perez:

Very good. So we've hit having a plan. As you said, before you even start your car, you've got to know where you're going. And if you have a mental route to travel or you're following a computerized instructions, make sure you look at it ahead of time. So you'll be less surprised by what's on route. Is there construction that could slow you down? Are the lanes narrow? Maybe there's an alternative route you could take. Is there a school zone? Be very aware, as we mentioned. Children can jump right out in front of you.

Does a stretch of Interstate seem to have drivers going too fast? Well, it's important that you maintain your composure. All of this is about having your plan for any possible dangers. To second, what Major Blackmon said, stay focused.

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Derek Perez:

Driving is primarily a thinking task. If you're not focused on driving, you're going to miss signs and observations that will keep you safe. What's your speed? If you zone out, you could suddenly be going faster than the speed limit. Are you approaching an intersection? Crashes happen there more than any other place. Stay alert so you can approach with caution. Too many drivers just get in the car, turn their music on and go. Their focus gets distracted, especially when there's other passengers in the car.

Derek Perez:

Your primary responsibility as a driver is safely taking your vehicle from point A to point B. So know your route, know the road conditions, avoid distractions. It's hard to be focused on driving when other things are competing for your attention. The Major has pointed out that, talking on your cell phone, eating, browsing music selections. All of these things can distract the driver.

Derek Perez:

Try handing those aspects over to other passengers or better yet handle them before you hit the road, or at least find someplace to pull over. This doesn't just apply to teen drivers or new drivers. People who have been driving for a while can get overconfident in their driving abilities. And that's when they let their driving skills get sloppy. Major, can you share a story about distracted driving and how that's affected the people that you're protecting as an FHP officer?

Major Blackmon:

Absolutely. In the Central Florida area, when I worked there, I had 27 and half years I did down in the Orlando area. And 80% of our crashes were rear-end collisions. Those were so avoidable because most of those crashes occur because of distracted driving. And out by the University of Central Florida, there was a lot of pedestrian traffic that's walking back and forth from campus to their dorms, into their apartments, and to do some shopping. And distracted walking, believe it or not has led to people walking on the roadway and being struck by cars. So whether you're walking or driving distracted, you need to focus on where you're at, your surroundings, again, and pay attention to the area because a person walking does not stand a chance against a vehicle. Vehicles moving high rate of speed, most are either at the speed limit or above, when it impacts a person it's going to cause great bodily damage to that person.

Derek Perez:

Now you mentioned being down into the Orlando area, the UCF area. Can you talk about maybe the steps that they've taken to try to reduce crashes with pedestrians?

Major Blackmon:

Absolutely. We did a study. We call it the three E's. It's Education, Enforcement and Engineering. The University of Central Florida, along with our PA office in Orlando did some pressers and some information to the students to push out about safe crossing in the roadway there.

And then beyond that, we'd done some enforcement with the Sheriff's office and with the campus police, UCF police for jaywalking, basically the students are just aimlessly walking across the intersection, as well as the vehicles are traveling high rate of speed. And then beyond that, it's going to be the engineering, which you bring in DOT and the traffic engineers. They come in and do a study on

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the roadway, and currently they're planning to do a raised pedestrian bridge to get the pedestrians from one side of the thoroughfare to the other.

Derek Perez:

Wow, and it sounds like, even if a pedestrian is walking in texting, it's still incumbent on the drivers. Is that right?

Major Blackmon:

Absolutely. That's why the drivers need to pay attention and not be distracted while they're driving the vehicle. Because again, pay attention to your surroundings, who has any idea of when a person who could be walking, talking, texting on their phone could walk into traffic and then we do not need a fatal crash. So they're so avoidable on both parts, but if you're driving a car, focus on driving, put the phone down and let's worry about it when you come to a stop.

Derek Perez:

Thank you, Major Blackmon. Now, when you're behind the wheel, it is important to stay alert. If you're sleepy or under the influence of a controlled substance, you will not react quickly to potential problems such as a driver ahead of you slamming on its brakes. Now, this is a good point to bring up, that alcohol or drugs, including prescription and over-the-counter drugs can affect a driver's reaction time and judgment. Drowsy driving has the same effect and is one of the leading causes of crashes. Rest up before a road trip. Now, when you're out on the road, watch for others.

Derek Perez:

At the beginning of this podcast, we stated how it's not just about you. It's about all those around you. The more in tune you become with safe driving, the more you'll become aware of others. Don't assume another driver will behave the way you expect them to. For example, if you see them approaching a stop sign rapidly, anticipate that they will not stop. You're predicting a risk and acting before they may react. If you're using your eyes to spot others, you're less likely to be caught off guard. By watching ahead of you and in your mirrors, and by darting your eyes towards potential threats, you can anticipate what another driver might do. Anticipation can reduce crash risk.

Derek Perez:

Two more points to hit is leaving space. If you're riding someone else's bumper and they break suddenly you have very little reaction time to stop. Instead of a fender bender provide yourself space between you and other cars so you can react if needed. Is there a recommended distance between cars, Major?

Major Blackmon:

Yeah, there is. The general rule of thumb is about three to four seconds under optimal conditions. If the weather conditions are poor, obviously you got to reduce that. But if you're following a large truck or motorcycle and you give them the distance as well.

Derek Perez:

Now, if someone else around you is driving erratically or too fast or dangerously slow, let them get a safe distance away. If the driving behavior is extremely dangerous, such as the vehicle weaving all over the road, where can a driver report that kind of driving, Major?

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Major Blackmon:

On your cell phone it's easy to do *347, which is *FHP, which takes you straight to our comms center, or you could use 911. Well, that is an important message because safe driving keeps everyone safe.

Derek Perez:

Now the last point, I'll hit is managing your speed. It's your responsibility to know posted speed limits and to obey them. But speed limits often apply to optimal road conditions. If it's raining, especially the way it does here in Florida, it might be wise to reduce your speed, increased speed decreases reaction time and increases crash severity. Maintain control by managing your speed. You know, since 1975, teen driving deaths have dropped significantly due to improved vehicle safety, but car crashes are still the number one killer of teen drivers and approximately 3,000 deaths per year.

We don't say this to scare you, but just to point out that no one is invincible and safety matters.

Well, there was a lot of general safety tidbits there for our first point about defensive driving. When we return after a break Major Blackmon, and I will cover some specific ways to avoid a crash.

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It's late. You're yawning, drifting into other lanes. This is drowsy driving. It caused over 4,200 crashes in Florida last year. The Florida Highway Patrol reminds you to get enough sleep before you drive. When you're tired, stop in a safe place like a rest area or service plaza to take a break. Drive alert for your safety and those around you, especially if you're a commercial driver. Take a break, don't drive drowsy. Brought to you by the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.

Derek Perez:

Welcome back to 3PointTurn, where we're discovering how to implement defensive-driving tactics. The biggest of driving defensively is to minimize crashes. Major Blackmon, care to elaborate.

Major Blackmon:

Absolutely. Sometimes the crash is unavoidable. You may only have a split second to react, but your brain can process that information. If, it knows what's about to occur. And that's why we're going to highlight, how to lessen the damage of a crash that you may be involved in.

Derek Perez:

So, would you say that this is a crash course, Major?

Major Blackmon:

Yeah, I think so.

Derek Perez:

Sorry. I couldn't avoid the pun. Okay, enough of that. Major, how do you minimize the effects of a crash?

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Major Blackmon:

Some of the things you can do is, you need to have an escape route. While you're driving, pay attention, keep a safe distance between yourself and the other vehicles. Position your car, so that you can see others and others can see you. Give yourself an escape route, sometimes if you pull up behind the car too tight in an intersection and the car breaks down, become disabled and you are so close. You're going to be stuck as a light cycles and cycles and cycles, trying to pick a lane to pull into.

Major Blackmon:

If hit another vehicle, then aim for spots that are designed to take the impacts. If it's a rear-end crash, instead of hitting a car directly in behind, you can try to turn your car towards the taillight instead of their license plate. This will be less damaging to both vehicles. If you're going to be in a T-bone crash, try to aim for the trunk or engine. If you see people in the car obviously try to avoid them. If it's possible, try to lessen the impact on the occupants of the vehicle. And if it's a head-on crash, try to veer to the right away from oncoming traffic. And hopefully the worst you'll do is hit their driver's side headlight with your driver's side headlight.

Derek Perez:

I've always been told that, if there's an obstacle in the road or someone breaks suddenly in front of you to brake hard as if there's no escape. So you're definitely going to collide with something or you definitely are trying to slow your vehicle before that collision, that you want to just break as hard as you can. Is that correct?

Major Blackmon:

That is correct.

Derek Perez:

So the force is affected by your speed. So if you can slow your speed, then the force of the impact will be lessened. Any reduction in speed will reduce the damage done to you, your car and your passengers. This also brings into highlight why speeding is so dangerous when driving, the faster you go, the worst a crash may be.

Derek Perez:

Now, let's say that you have picked your escape route, you've braked hard, and you've tried to aim your car, but there's no option in avoiding this particular crash. What do you do, Major?

Major Blackmon:

Best thing you can do is apply the brakes, hold the steering wheel and stay on the roadway. If you leave the road, you have absolutely no control of your car. You have to counter steer, and then you're trying to hit the softest object, which could be concrete poles, utility poles, trees, once a car leaves the road, also it has a tendency to overturn, which is far more dangerous.

Derek Perez:

And of course, if you do have to choose between a crash with another vehicle, crashing into something else, pick an object that will do the least amount of damage. For example, if your only option is to swerve towards a trash can or a bush to avoid another vehicle, the aim for the trash can it'll do less

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damage than the bush. A wooden pole, over a metal light pole, a small tree over a larger tree, a bush over any tree and a side crash with a concrete barrier over a head on.

Derek Perez:

Even in a crash with an object that's not a vehicle, you can try to lessen the severity by aiming your car. I mean, don't hit the tree head-on, try to side swipe it. So summarize, it's better to swerve off the road instead of into oncoming traffic. It's better to drive off the road than to skid, but once you're off the road, you will lose control, so it's better to hit a non-moving object than a moving one. And it's better to hit something soft or at least soft as compared to something harder like a bush instead of a tree.

Derek Perez:

Now, Major Blackmon, can you perhaps give us a story about a sometime where someone was able to maybe minimize the effects of a crash by quick thinking and planning like this?

Major Blackmon:

Biggest thing is, if you're approaching such as an animal on road – we work a lot of crashes that involve animals – so the suggestion is, is to stay on the roadway, try to avoid the animal, staying under control, reduce your speed by breaking and try to avoid the animals and stay on the roadway. If, you strike the animal. Obviously we... A lot of people care a lot about animals. However, the most important thing for us is to stay alive ourselves.

Major Blackmon:

Try to avoid the animal at all costs, but if you can't reduce the speed on your vehicle, stay on the roadway, the best you can on the road because once you hit the shoulder, you lose control, and again, as I said earlier, there is a tendency for the vehicles to roll.

Derek Perez:

Listeners, remember, we don't want you to get into a crash. We've illustrated many ways in this podcast series to implement safe driving techniques. But if a crash is unavoidable, hopefully these defensive driving tips will help you out of a hairy situation.

After a quick break, Major Blackmon and I are going to finish up this conversation with a look at over-corrections.

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Derek Perez:

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Welcome back. Major Blackmon, onto our final thoughts on this 3PointTurn episode about defensive driving. This last point isn't so much something to do, as it is something not to do. And that is over-correct. It sounds self-explanatory, but do you want to define that for our listeners?

Major Blackmon:

Yes. Overcorrection is, basically you're driving along, coming up on something you're probably too close, driving too fast, or you're distracted. And then a crash is occurring in front... Or you're about to strike something, so you freak out and you do everything in your power to avoid this collision. So you're going to... We call it oversteering. You're going to steer away from the crash, you're going to go off the road and oversteer, at that point, basically you've lost control of your vehicle and ultimately you're going to be in a crash and hopefully you survive well.

Derek Perez:

When a driver is on the road and they suddenly begin to lose control, like you said, panic can set in. And that driver will anticipate an immediate danger, and they respond instinctively. But often that response is wrong, and as you said it, puts the driver at greater risk of rolling their car. There are countless situations that can trigger a driver to over-correct. Would you mind running through a few of them?

Major Blackmon:

No problem. You're hitting the side of the road, a rumble patch, the noisy bumpy section, which alerts the drivers that you've driven off the roadway such on the Interstates. Drifting off the road entirely onto the shoulder, another vehicle swerving into your lane weather conditions, such as puddles or icy patches, and we were talking about that off camera, but when you encounter weather conditions, you need to reduce your speed just because it says you can do 70 doesn't mean you have to do 70. So there is a state statute that covers that, that says you have to be prudent and use due care. So by that, you've had to reduce your speed to the conditions. So just because it's 70 doesn't mean you can do 70.

Derek Perez:

Overcorrections often start with a lack of focus on the road, such as distracted or drowsy driving. These are topics we've discussed extensively on the 3PointTurn series. So please listen to those episodes, if you haven't already done so. And most importantly, heed that advice that we present.

Derek Perez:

Larger trucks and SUVs are at a much greater risk of vehicle rollover because of their height and their narrow wheelbase. That's why it's crucial, both novice and experienced drivers are aware of the dangers of overcorrection. Now, Major, if you do find yourself in a situation where you are suddenly presented with a seemingly panic situation, what are some things you can do instead of oversteering.

Major Blackmon:

Instead of oversteering, you can steer into the skids caused by slippery roads. Let off the gas pedal entirely and slow down. Even if that means driving off the shoulder for short period, if you're on the shoulder of the road, do not steer back onto the pavement immediately, continue to slow down, straddle the pavement, and try to ease back on the highway. Counter-steer carefully to prevent veering into the opposite lane, do not break this causes momentum to stop immediately at a force which can triggers rollover as a steering wheels and car wheels are possibly turning. Accelerate back to normal traffic speed as soon and safely as possible.

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Derek Perez:

Major, you mentioned counter-steering would you mind defining that for the listening audience?

Major Blackmon:

Absolutely. Counter-steering is when you're trying to steer away from whatever you headed to, such as back of a semi or a tree. So you're trying to steer the vehicle away from the direction it's traveling.

Derek Perez:

Good advice always. Now we did use this example, a couple of podcasts ago, when we talked about commercial motor vehicles but recently a teen driver looked down at her phone late at night, drifted off the road, over-corrected back onto the interstate and crashed into the back of the semi. This caused the semi to crash and unfortunately its driver to die. Having that plan and maintaining your focus really are the keys to avoiding the panic situations that lead to over-correction.

Derek Perez:

Now single-car crashes can occur, and many times in overcorrection leads to a single-car crash that involves rolling over in the median, or sends the person careening off the road into a tree. Let me repeat don't panic, as the Major suggested, let off the gas, keep driving straight, and never jerk the wheel.

Now some really great info on defensive driving has been presented and it hopefully keeps our listeners in good shape on the road. And that means the main part of this podcast series is now complete, but you and I are going to come back for one final episode Major. And in that we're going to assess some of the mundane but necessary aspects of getting on the road and staying on it. Until next time, drive safe Florida.

FLHSMV:

On the next episode of 3PointTurn, the FLHSMV team wraps up the podcast series by helping all drivers understand how to stay legal and current on their driver license, insurance, and vehicle registration.

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